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SUBJECT: FRIENDS OF BELARUS ASSESS POLICY IN LIGHT OF NEW REALITIES

Classified By: USEU Polmincouns Christopher Davis for reasons 1.5 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) On September 15, EUR DAS David Merkel and U.S. Charge d'Affaires to Belarus Jonathan Moore participated in a Friends of Belarus meeting convened at the Lithuanian Permanent Mission to the EU, in Brussels. Other participants included EU Political Directors and other senior officials from Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Sweden, France, the UK, Germany, Slovenia, the Commission (DDG Kovanda) and Council Secretariat (Policy Director Schmid). The meeting, held on the margin of the monthly EU Foreign Ministers meeting (GAERC), was the first time the group was able to collectively assess relations with Belarus in the wake of the conflict in Georgia. EU and U.S. officials generally agreed that new geostrategic realities were driving Belarus to try to re-balance its relationship with Russia and attempt a rapprochement with the West. This was evidenced by Belarusian President Lukashenko's delaying tactics on whether to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Merkel noted that the U.S. and EU could use the issue as a lever on the regime in Minsk, and not the other way around.

¶2. (C) European Friends, EU institutions and the United States concurred that it would be useful to intensify encouraging signals to Minsk prior to the election, but balked at a Lithuanian-Polish proposal (later floated at the GAERC) to hold a formal Foreign Ministers Troika meeting with Minsk or remove any EU sanctions in advance of the Parliamentary elections on September 28. For its part, the European Commission was currently pursuing technical expert-level talks with Belarus and would make future offers for more robust cooperation contingent on the outcome of the Parliamentary elections, and in areas where it already had a standing mandate from the EU Member States.

¶3. (C) German MFA CIS Regional Policy Director Hans-Dieter Lucas said prominent opposition figure Alexandr Kazulin expected the upcoming elections would be "worse than in 2004." Nonetheless, EU and U.S. diplomats agreed that it was important to encourage the Belarusian political opposition to participate in the elections rather than boycott them. The UK rep wondered aloud whether Friends shared a common definition of "success" in the conduct of the elections. The Czech Poldir cautioned Friends to avoid over-focusing on the technicalities of the elections, and instead look at the "broader picture of relations between Minsk and Moscow," which were Lukashenko's "main game." While partners widely acknowledged that elections were unlikely to meet internationally recognized standards, Merkel urged EU Friends to match a realistic assessment of the elections with a strong final push to encourage improvements and support the OSCE mission.

¶4. (C) EUR DAS Merkel reviewed U.S. trade-related sanctions relief o date (related to prisoner releases) and previewed possible next steps with regard to our visa ban. At the same time, Merkel pointed out tht because FM Martynov had explicitly linked the GOB's diplomatic attack on the U.S. Embassy in Minsk to U.S. sanctions, Washington had no choice but to link removal of U.S. sanctions to improvements in the diplomatic relationship as well as to overall human rights and democracy objectives there.

¶5. (U) DAS Merkel and Charge Moore did not have the opportunity to clear this message.
MURRAY

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